



The Limits of Community

Wendell Berry, Books Bans, and Intellectual Freedom as an Individual Right

Author _ Michael Kirby (michael.kirby@kbcc.cuny.edu), Assistant Professor/Reader Services at CUNY Kingsborough Community College.

Beginning with a broad overview of community-oriented arguments for or against intellectual freedom (exemplified, in one case, by the writer and activist Wendell Berry), this chapter defines two forms of community: one active, the other passive. But do appeals to community make sense in environments increasingly hostile to intellectual freedom? In what ways have both of these forms already been weaponized by right-wing actors? It can certainly be argued that intellectual freedom benefits communities, but what if a community rejects intellectual freedom altogether? After detailing a recent case involving Nikole Hannah-Jones's The 1619 Project as well as subsequent efforts to ban the project in school classrooms across the United States, this chapter comes back to Berry, using his writings on gay marriage as a framework from which to (re)cast intellectual freedom as an individual—not a communitarian—right.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), noted in an interview with Michelle Goldberg (2021) of the *New York Times*, that she has “never seen the number of [book] challenges . . . seen this year [2021]” (para. 2). It is no secret that most of these challenges, some of which have spilled over into school board meetings (Alter and Harris 2022; Pérez 2021), were instigated by right-wing actors or organizations (Gabbatt 2022; Kamenetz 2021).

Perhaps just as troubling as this recent uptick in book bans, however, is when self-styled centrists, like Wendell Berry, as well as members of the political Left, join the Right in undergirding their arguments for (or against) intellectual freedom with appeals to variously defined “communities.” The content of these arguments—their pro or contra stance vis-à-vis intellectual freedom—is not the focus of this

chapter (although later paragraphs will deal with the ways in which both the Left and Right have sought to limit free speech.) Instead, this chapter poses the following question: does positing intellectual freedom as a communitarian right have political utility, especially as it concerns the recent struggle against book bans?



For a typical example of this type of community-oriented appeal, one can look to Berry (2000/2019) when he writes:

In fiction and poetry, in biography, in journalism and the entertainment industry, and finally in politics, the cutting edge for most of the twentieth century has been the dis-covering of the intimate, the secret, the sexual, the private and the obscene . . .

I would question . . . the worth of freedom from . . . “deep-set repugnancies” . . . it is dangerous to speak of them carelessly. To speak of them carelessly is to violate yet another nucleus that ought to be sacrosanct. (186)

He continues,

Such exposures do not make us free, and they do not increase our knowledge. They only compound human cruelty by a self-induced numbness to the suffering of others and to our common suffering.

The question for art, then, is . . . Can it properly subordinate itself to concerns that are larger than its own? (193)

If art damages the community, or “concerns larger than its own” in Berry’s nomenclature, its existence is morally unjustifiable. This viewpoint has been expressed by many other writers and thinkers, at the very least stretching back to Plato (1989), who, in *The Republic*, finds that poets threaten the moral integrity of the city-state. Likewise, Rousseau, in his novel *Julie; or, The New Heloise*, accuses “literature, and by extension reading, of the disruption that eventually corrupts ideal societies” (Vanpée 1990, 40). One could also be reminded of both Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, in which diametrically opposed political movements led to the outright suppression of speech. In short, the notion that the “safety” of communities should always take precedence over free speech is an ancient and enduring one, underpinning, at different times throughout the centuries, both left-wing and right-wing critiques of intellectual freedom.

This notion lives on in the present; “community” is similarly invoked in today’s divisive political climate—either as an *active* participant in the fight to ban books (“the community must rescue its youth from ‘pornography’”) or as a *passive* participant in need of saving (“the community must be protected from ‘pornography’”). The Left seems fond of the latter definition, especially in academic contexts, where “community” is sometimes used as a catch-all theoretical justification for almost any kind of programming (Edwards, Robinson, and Unger 2013; Robertson 2004; Smallwood 2010). The Right, however, prefers to oscillate between the two understandings of community, selecting one or the other

depending on what makes the most rhetorical sense during any given media appearance (Alter and Harris 2022). The purpose of this chapter is to offer a refutation of both the active and passive conceptualizations of community and to assert that an intellectual freedom rooted in individualism is best able to protect the free speech rights of everyone—including, and perhaps most importantly, minorities and the underrepresented.

The Communitarian Defense of Intellectual Freedom

The ways in which intellectual freedom benefits communities is well-documented (Oltmann 2017; Redish 1982; Sturges 2016). In this sense, then, it can be argued that intellectual freedom is communitarian in nature. It is an entirely different matter, however, to say that intellectual freedom is valued in all communities; as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, freedom of speech, historically speaking, has been denounced under almost all political regimes and is currently under attack from a newly emboldened right-wing. It is thus vital to make the following point clear: The claim that intellectual freedom provides a net benefit to communities is not something this chapter seeks to refute. Rather, what remains questionable is whether emphasizing intellectual freedom’s communitarian benefits is *enough* to defend it from its detractors. What if there exist two mutually exclusive groups with competing conceptions of what constitutes a “community”? What if both groups seek, in their own ways, to limit free speech? These are the questions this chapter seeks to address.

Why Book Bans?

It is indisputable, as Berry (1977/2019) notes, that rural and exurban communities have been hollowed out at a rapid pace, both in terms of economic opportunity and local culture. Examples abound, from the loss of jobs that supply a livable wage in post-industrial America (Randell 2016), to the scourge of drug overdoses affecting these same communities (Hedegaard and Spencer 2021). Comparatively wealthy suburban communities also face their own problems, including drug addiction (Gaines et al. 2020; Lassiter 2015). As evidenced by OIF’S *Banned & Challenged Classics* (n.d.), these same rural, exurban, and suburban communities are the locus of the recent book banning efforts. Therefore, I will give the benefit of the doubt here and assume that this newly resurgent desire to remove books from schools comes not from some latent fascist impulse, but rather from a place of powerlessness; it’s much easier for people to pull the levers of the government they *can* control (often, local school boards)



than to challenge, say, corporations, which often exist, by design, beyond the control of locally elected officials and are the real cause of the destruction of communities across the United States. How best to combat this misplaced anger, justified in most cases through appeals to passive or active conceptualizations of community, is where this chapter will now turn.

Passive Community: A Refutation

This exultation of community at the expense of the individual is most easy to repudiate in the passive form: Does the availability of “undesirable” literature within school libraries harm communities? Does it cause more harm than, say, voting for politicians who are hostile to climate initiatives? Voting for politicians who have cozied up to agribusiness? It seems disingenuous to argue that it does, seeing as climate change has actual material risks and has, in short, already led to real deaths (“More than One-Third of Heat Deaths” 2021). As Berry (1977/2019) himself reminds us, agribusiness, too, has irreparably damaged millions of acres of once-fertile soil. Can anyone insist that LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual) children’s literature causes comparable damage? Can we take seriously a movement that wants to “save us” from the “threat” of queer relationships but is more than willing to ally itself with perpetrators of ecological mismanagement? The point is not that communities cannot be the focus of politics, or that communitarian identity fails a priori as a political category. Rather, the point is that there are various other ways in which a community can be strengthened—through coordinated efforts to curb the outsized influence of corporations vis-à-vis demonetizing elections, through the transfer of power to local governments, or through reinvestment in struggling regional industries. None of these (partial) solutions require the curtailing of intellectual freedom.

It would be neglectful to ignore the ways in which some segments of the Left have, in recent years, advocated for the removal of literature from the classroom (Medeiros 2018; Revers and Traummüller 2020); the Left, like the Right, does sometimes appeal to a more passive conceptualization of community, one in need of saving from “outside” forces. As previously noted, it is not the opinion of this writer that the invocation of a passive (or even active) community is inherently right-wing in nature. What is clear, however, is that the Left seems to be on the defensive in almost all recent cases of book banning, making a discussion of their historical attempts to remove literature from classrooms an almost moot point in the context of this chapter’s focus on the Right’s much more recent (and frequent) attacks on free speech.

There is nothing more illustrative of this defensive posture on the Left than the controversy surrounding Nikole Hannah-Jones’s *The 1619 Project*, which has faced outsized criticism from members of the Republican establishment (“Why conservatives,” 2021). Published as a “corrective” to existing historical narratives about the founding of the United States, *The 1619 Project* asserts that the true founding of the nation occurred in 1619, when African slaves first arrived in the American colonies. And while leftists have critiqued the project (e.g., Bynum 2019), mostly on the grounds of inaccurate claims about the American Revolution being fought to preserve slavery, the response from the Right seems to indicate their intention to silence Hannah-Jones through an appeal to a passive “American” community in need of rescuing from “anti-American sentiment.” Former President Donald Trump stated that the *1619 Project* has “defiled” the story of America (Segers and Watson 2020), while Governor DeSantis of Florida has made unsubstantiated claims about the piece “tearing communities apart” (Gancarski 2021, par. 8).

The *New York Times* (which published *The 1619 Project*) deflected many of these attacks by appealing to “the free exchange of ideas and its crucial [role in] expanding public understanding” (Levy 2021). The Right, unsurprisingly, was unpersuaded by this appeal and continues to purge *The 1619 Project* from the classroom through legislation (Executive Office of Governor Ron DeSantis 2021; Schwartz 2021). This turn from a “community under siege” mentality to a weaponization of the legislative process seems to mark the Right’s transition from a passive conceptualization of community to a more active conceptualization.

Active Community: A Refutation

The Right seems to have entered a new phase in which they are more actively seeking to weaponize communities against books they deem “unfit.” One must grant that when used in legislative assemblies and by parents at school board meetings as a bludgeon against intellectual freedom, the phrase “our community” implies a whole host of assumptions; it is often, admittedly, code for “our white, heterosexual community,” which itself is an idealized remembrance that never corresponded to historical reality. The invocation of “our community,” when used in this way, is exclusionary, even when—or especially when—invoked in courtrooms or at school board meetings in rural and suburban counties where racial diversity, as noted by Lichter (2012), has been on the rise for years.

An antiquated understanding of community as a purely spatial designation also underpins these arguments. In the age of the Internet, however, there are all types of



communities that we no longer delineate in this purely spatial way. One might even go as far to suggest, like De Falco (2021), that the difference between physical spaces and online spaces is collapsing. One example, of course, may be social media platforms where queer people find a community of like-minded individuals. Which community (the physical or the online) takes precedence here? It seems obvious to me that favoring the physical would be betrayal of the individual liberties of people who, by dint of their (sexual, racial, and/or gender) differences, might find themselves at odds with their local environments and must subsequently seek social fulfillment elsewhere. This is not to imply that queer people cannot find resonance with their local environments. However, despite the rapid progress experienced by some queer individuals in the United States, cultural and legal barriers still exist, and in some cases, progressive wins have led to significant backsliding (Alter and Zürn 2020).

Strangely enough, Berry (2015/2019) lambasts this selective withholding of rights, albeit in a different essay and in reference to a different political struggle:

This right [gay marriage] depends upon a curious agreement between liberals and conservatives that human rights originate in government, to be dispensed to the people according to their pleading at the government's pleasure. . . . This flatly contradicts the founding principle of American democracy that human rights are precedent to the government's existence, that the government is established to protect them, and that the government must be restrained from violating them.

. . . it cannot be allowable, under the above principles, for the government, on the pleading of some of the people, to establish a right solely for the purpose of withholding it from some other people. (p. 624)

Berry asserts that the right to gay marriage is something that exists prior to the establishment of a government and cannot be withheld, only guaranteed. One could take this this even further and suggest that one of the federal government's main prerogatives might be to protect the individual from any active (and passive) conceptualizations of community that would deny marriage to certain populations and not others. We might generalize and conclude that, in Berry's estimation, local governments have a broad purview over communitarian affairs, while the federal government is tasked with protection of individual rights. The question then becomes the following: which of the two categories of rights in which we can place intellectual

freedom—communitarian (local government) or individualistic (federal government)—offers it the best protection?

Intellectual Freedom as an Individual Right

We can return to Berry's example about the selective withholding of rights. Gay marriage, for a short time, was regulated by local and state communities; some queer individuals in the United States were able to be legally married, while others were denied that same right. The main danger in casting intellectual freedom as a communitarian right is that it might come to resemble the gay marriage of a begone era—practiced in some states, illegal in others.

Asserting that free speech is an individual right thus becomes a political necessity, without which the country might be (further) divided into spheres of political influence with inconsistent, often competing, applications of the law as it concerns intellectual freedom. One can imagine the dangers posed to minorities who find themselves in hostile environments, unable to appeal to the rights guaranteed rights because the states in which they live have outlawed even the mention of their identities in public spaces. We are already glimpsing this future, not only in Florida (Larkins 2022), but across the country, where different laws governing marijuana possession (yet to be federally allowable) and abortion already exist.

Conclusion

In some ways, the discussion surrounding the current book-banning mania can be recast in the following light: many of the perpetrators operate under the misguided belief that wielding any sort of political control over the system—no matter how banal, no matter how detrimental to certain, less-privileged community members—is better than facing up to the truth of the situation: We increasingly have no control over the communities in which we live. Banning books is an illusory victory meant to mask this fact and removing literature from shelves does nothing to address the underlying causes of corporate overreach or entrenched political divides.

Appeals to the communitarian benefits of free speech from the Center and Left are helpful in some instances, but they rarely persuade right-wing detractors and risk parroting the same language that conceptualizes intellectual freedom as an issue to be regulated at the level of the community. Reconceptualizing intellectual freedom as in individual right that exists beyond the purview of local governments offers a way out of this inter-community struggle. But it is only a starting point in the fight against book bans.



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